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The Study of Literary Texts at the Nexus of Multiple Histories in the Intermediate College-Level German Classroom

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This article addresses the teaching of complex representations of history through the study of literary texts in the college-level intermediate German class, employing the categories and tenets of Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis (see also Scollon, 2001). Nexus analysis is a model for understanding the meeting point of social actions and multiple discourses, each with its own historical body, interaction order, and discourses in place. These discourses and social actions can include the narrated action of the text, the author's writing of the text, the reception of the text, and of course, the student's reading and study of the text. Important for pedagogical design, nexus analysis includes consideration of the analyst's—in this case the L2 student's—own discourses and social actions. The curricular proposals based on two literary works by German-Jewish authors within a conventional intermediate-level German language course provide the framework for curriculum and teaching that allows learners at this level to engage with multiple, intersecting and overlapping historical, literary, and cultural issues and questions. It further involves consideration of multiple levels of analysis and multiple timescales in order to raise learners' critical historical consciousness.

History is time filled with cultural and social actions, not just chronology.
(Blommaert & Huang, 2009, p. 271)

INTRODUCTION

History and Memory through Literature in the Intermediate Language Classroom

In second-language (L2) literature seminars at the upper-division level, students typically study texts in a variety of ways, sometimes explicitly through a historicist approach: they consider the text in its social, cultural and historical context, link it to the biography of the author, explore the reception of the text at the time of its publication and in times since, compare and contrast the text with similar texts of the period, or with texts of different genres. They also discuss the relevance of the text in the lives of readers, including themselves as students. In this setting, the study of literary texts is often part of the study of history and memory in the L2 society as the meeting place of histories and their many representations and interpretations. This depth and mode of analysis is usually reserved for upper-division literature courses due to the density and difficulty of authentic texts and the demands on the students to be able to read them.

In contrast, at the introductory and intermediate levels of instruction, sophisticated engagement with and analysis of texts, histories, and memories often remains bracketed out as peripheral, or it is carried out through English translations and/or discussion in English rather than the L2. The reasons for this are not unfounded, based as they are on vocabulary and grammatical knowledge limitations, and the multiple pedagogical goals and time constraints of language courses. More often than not, the substantive or critical study of aspects of the histories and cultures of the L2 society, or the use of literary texts to gain access to these aspects, remains outside of the experience of most adult L2 learners.¹ Culture learning often is overtly synchronic and ‘factual’ in nature, purporting to convey declarative information and facilitate learning about aspects of the L2 culture *today*, with the goal of helping students to function successfully in the L2 society. In essence students are asked to be ethnographers of the L2 culture, but with limited information, and little or no consideration of the overlapping, coinciding, and conflicting discourses, each with its own historical roots, that underpin even the most quotidian synchronic discourses and practices (Blommaert & Huang, 2009). The risk is that vocabulary, grammar, and historical ‘facts’ provided in many mainstream textbooks and even selected literary passages are empty vehicles as students remain locked within their own cultural frames of reference (Byram & Kramsch, 2008).

Considering that most students in U.S. universities do not continue their studies of the L2 beyond the intermediate level, there is a strong imperative to provide students with opportunities to critically study (some of) the history of the L2 society, and further, for them to gain an understanding of why they are doing so, and what they can gain from it as developing multilingual users of their first language(s) and the L2 (Maxim, 2006). To do this through the study of literary texts would go a long way toward eliminating, or at least blurring, the two-tiered curricular structure that the 2007 MLA report and others have argued continues to limit the potential of U.S. university language education (MLA, 2007; Pratt et al, 2008). It would also help the language profession to explore new, inherently multidisciplinary learning paths early on in the curriculum (see Wellmon, 2008) and, in terms of the focus of this special issue, to develop “critical language awareness and historical consciousness” as proposed by the MLA report (MLA, 2007, p. 2-3). It is necessary to develop a pedagogical framework that would facilitate the study of history through literature that would not require the instructor to turn the course into a history or literature seminar. Just as we need theoretically motivated approaches to teaching all aspects of language, from verbal interaction to vocabulary learning to grammar, so too would we benefit from a principled approach to the study of history and memory through the literary text in the language classroom.

In this article I will focus specifically on the college intermediate level (usually second year of instruction), and make use of Scollon’s (2001) and Scollon and Scollon’s (2004) “nexus analysis” as a way to structure and organize pedagogical decisions regarding the classroom study of texts. While not envisioned as an approach either to language or literature teaching, rather as a means of analyzing the intersection of discourses and social actions, I will show how nexus analysis can

¹ With this statement I do not wish to diminish the complex tensions between the teaching of literary texts and the teaching of history and memory. As Wellmon (2008, p. 294) expresses in an observation about New Historicism’s influence on contemporary language/literature curriculum and the place of literary study within it, the literary text possesses “a privileged gravitational pull, an ability to organize cultural meaning better, most economically perhaps, than most any other cultural object.” The risk for the classroom context, as outlined by Gramling and Warner (2012), is that the literary text becomes constrained to its role as conveyer of social or historical conditions of a particular time.

provide a framework for the classroom study of texts in all their complexities, a way to unify the micro-analysis of unfolding moments of social action and the “much broader socio-political analysis of the relationships among social groups and power interests in the society” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 8). Social action, also called mediated action, is any action taken by an individual with reference to a social network (p. 11). It is a means to investigate the synchronous state of aspects of the L2 society, embedded within its historical lineage (Blommaert & Huang, 2009; cf. Bourdieu’s 1991 notion of “field”). The “nexus” in this conceptualization is the meeting point of multiple social practices that are linked together (Scollon, 2001, p. 147), it is the intersection of discourses and social actions that are relevant for what the observer/analyst is interested in understanding. The nexus of this analysis includes what I would call “the social practice and discourses of studying an L2 literary text in its multiple historical contexts.” It would include the discourses embedded within the text itself, as reproduced by the author, the discourses of the genre in which the author placed the work, and the relevant discourses and particular histories surrounding the text in the L2 society, with an added consideration of the discourses of the teacher and students studying and discussing the text.

The Literary Text as Part of a Dynamic Historical Process

The risk in teaching history within the intermediate language curriculum, in a course not specifically designed as a history seminar, is that students’ investigation of history, and further, of the ways particular events or epochs are collectively remembered and given meaning in the L2 society, are either reduced from their complexities to the point of being trivial, or else they remain embedded within the learner’s own schemas or frames of reference—grafted, so to speak, onto students’ own collective memories, even those relating to the L2 society (see Byram & Kramsch, 2008; Wertsch, 2002). For example, a student in one of my recent courses was a devotee of television documentaries dealing with the Nazi era. As a teacher I quickly identified my most important role with this student, to nudge him toward integrating into his substantial encyclopedic knowledge of the period a sense of the myriad, complex ways different Germans remember and talk about the war. I decided that access to these could be found in several short stories from the post-WWII generation.

My experiences with this student underscore the fact that teaching history in its complexity as part of the language curriculum does not require students to acquire or to memorize a laundry list of facts, rather to explore the many *layers, timescales, and variation of representations and perspectives* of a particular event or topic. As illustrated below in a consideration of aspects of German-Jewish history and culture, embracing complexity in the curriculum is about identifying the nexus of practice in which we are interested and then determining the most salient factors to study. This is where the literary text comes into the picture. The literary text is of course a work of art in its own right, but it is also a cultural tool that mediates in complex ways between the cultural subject matter in which we are interested and the student seeking new insights into the L2 culture.

The purpose of this article is to approach the teaching of literary texts at the nexus of multiple histories. At this point it would be important to address a key objection that could be raised to this approach, namely that the literary text is being exploited primarily for the purpose of learning about historical events or epochs. With the conventional structures and approaches of university courses in mind, which often make explicit this sort of instrumentalization, it is admittedly a risk that the student will view the literary text in this way, primarily as a tool that they can ‘use’ to merely ‘acquire’ aspects of history and culture, sanctioned and facilitated by the

curriculum that the teacher has designed for them. We can take steps toward mitigating this potential problem, however by viewing the text, the curriculum, the historical epoch in which the text was written, the narrated time within the text, the ways the text has been read and/or studied since its publication, and all of the agents involved—which include the author, the student, the teacher, the physical context of reading and learning, and the program in which the text is taught, all as part of one complex system, to be regarded at multiple social scales and across multiple timescales, from the moment of interaction in the classroom back to the historical arc that led to the creation of the literary genre under investigation. Seen in this way, the question arises of how the student could ever read and study the text as an aesthetic creation *without* striving for awareness of this complex, dynamic system of which the student and the text are a part. Put another way, one *can* study history solely by reading texts written by historians, or by examining original historical records and documents. And one can study, and appreciate, a literary text by reading and analyzing the text without knowing much or anything about the author, the epoch, or perhaps even the historical events described within the text. But ultimately each of these aspects can be enriched by the other. A pedagogy derived from this approach becomes a vehicle for helping students connect with the collective memories and multiple histories that give literary works in particular their many meanings in the L2 culture. It can also help students reflect on aspects of their own collective memories and histories.

NEXUS ANALYSIS REPURPOSED FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

To facilitate the study of a literary text at the nexus of multiple histories, of critically engaging the study of literature and history simultaneously, Scollon's (2001) and Scollon and Scollon's (2004) approach to discourse, which the authors call "nexus analysis," offers a method through which we can approach language pedagogy. As mentioned, it is a means to investigate the synchronous aspects of the L2 society, embedded within its historical lineage (Blommaert & Huang, 2009). The approach is a strategy based on the idea that "broader social issues are ultimately grounded in the micro-actions of social interaction and, conversely, the most mundane of micro-actions are nexus through which the largest *cycles* of social organization and activity *circulate*" (Scollon & Scollon 2004, p. 8 my emphasis). I emphasize the words "cycles" and "circulate" here, to highlight the dialogic relationship between the micro and macro levels of analysis. They imply continuous movement of the parts of the system under consideration, and they indicate to the analyst that any moment we examine in a cycle is itself dynamic and fleeting (Larsen-Freeman, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The "system" under consideration here is the language classroom in which a literary text is being read and studied, with all of its actors, materials, and processes, which includes the historical arcs of discourses related to both language teaching and learning, and the reading and study of literature.

A nexus analysis as analytical, and for us pedagogical, methodology has three main tasks:

1. engaging the nexus of practice
2. navigating the nexus of practice
3. changing the nexus of practice

The first task simply means taking the analyst into account as part of the system under investigation. The "nexus" under consideration is thus the student studying the L2 text at

multiple levels and across multiple timescales. In translating this to the classroom context, it's about raising awareness of the class members as part of the system.

The second task, navigating the nexus of practice, means that “the analyst works his or her way through the trajectories of participants, places, and situations both back in time historically and forward through actions and anticipations to see if crucial discourse cycles or semiotic cycles can be identified” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 9). In the example treatment of two literary texts I describe later on, we'll see that this too is about raising awareness of the “discourse cycles” at work both within the text, as well as between the text, the reader, the place of the L2 text in society, etc. Scollon and Scollon assert that “this is the main body of work of a nexus analysis and might take months or years depending on the *circumfencing* that is set in the analysis” (2004, p. 9; authors' emphasis). Circumfencing has to do with the scope of the analysis, which can and should be broadened as the analysis is carried out. It means making sure that the study does not become “obsessively narrowed to single moments, speech acts or events, or participants without seeing how these connect to other moments, acts, events, and participants which make up the full nexus” (p. 9). In pedagogical terms, it means allowing investigation and learning to take place in moving scopes, from broad to narrow or narrow to broad. It is here where I believe the approach provides a means for teachers to bring even quite difficult L2 texts, such as the Lasker-Schüler and Heine texts to be discussed shortly, into the intermediate language classroom, even when the students have not yet acquired the linguistic knowledge and skills to simply “read” and then openly discuss the L2 texts.²

The third task of a nexus analysis, “changing the nexus of practice” is the social action part of the process, whereby the practice of analysis itself contributes to social change. In the pedagogical context, it's about critical self-examination of the very educational contexts of our study of the L2 and L2 literary texts, and raised historical and cultural consciousness among the learners engaged in the analysis.

Three further terms of nexus analysis need clarification in order to make the connection to the pedagogical context of the language classroom, specifically one in which the literary text is the object of study. First, the “interaction order” refers to any of the many possible social arrangements by which we form relationships in social interactions (Goffman, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13). This is based on the observation that people behave differently depending in part on whether they are alone or acting together with other people (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13). Here we open possibilities for investigating in the classroom context both the interaction orders in which our author was a part, as well as those in which contemporary Germans and even our students are a part. Again, we can raise questions about the social or cultural currency of the act of reading and studying a text.

The second term, Nishida's (1958) concept of the “historical body,” encompasses a lifetime of personal habits that “come to feel so natural that one's body carries out actions seemingly without being told” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13). In studying works by the two German-Jewish authors under consideration, we can see that both texts were in part the product of seismic upheaval in the German-Jewish habitus, or historical body, of each author's generation, with interesting similarities and differences allowing for fruitful comparisons and investigations.

² Even at the university upper-division level it is often unrealistic to expect students who have had just two or perhaps three years of instruction to simply “read” an authentic literary work; students need and benefit from extensive scaffolding and pedagogical intervention of many sorts (see Byrnes, 2006; Kern, 2000; Swaffar & Arens, 2005).

Nexus analysis as approach to helping students delve into multiple histories within the curriculum further compels the teacher to integrate study of multiple historical bodies, including the students' own, sitting in a classroom studying German language, culture and history.

The third term is “discourses in place” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 14; see also Scollon & Scollon, 2003). The authors assert that “all places in the world are complex aggregates (or nexus) of many discourses which circulate through them” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 14). These discourses move through a place on different timescales, and have greater or lesser relevance for the social actions in which we are interested. The goal is to find a way to link aspects of the physical environment to the types of interaction and communication that take place. Again, this provides fertile ground for conceptualizing *place* as a factor in our study of the literary texts: the places represented in the narratives of the texts; the places where the authors themselves lived and worked; the places where the students study the texts, which, like time, affect how the texts are read.

A nexus analysis involves studying an event or phenomenon at the nexus of the historical body, the interaction order, and discourses in place. Scollon and Scollon represent it graphically in this way:

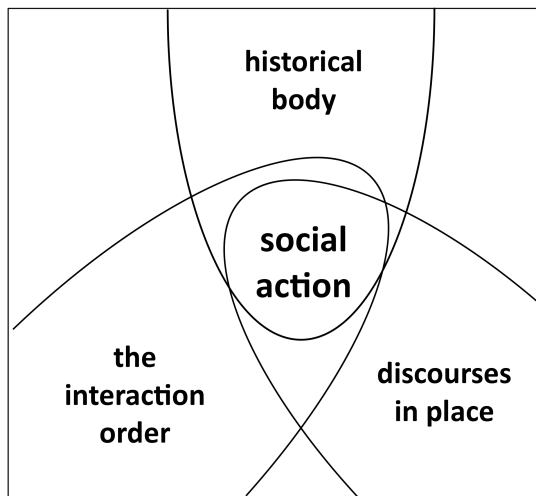


Figure 1: Cycles of discourse (based on Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 20)

The lines represent cycles of discourse, the nexus being the particular aspect of social action in which the analyst is interested. Nexus analysis is useful as a means of analyzing multiple, related discourses and social actions, and of identifying features that are salient to the questions of interest. It is a means of integrating rather than reducing the complexities of the system. Later on I will redraw this figure with the features of a pedagogy based on the Heine and Lasker-Schüler texts.

Multiple Histories and the Literary Text

An additional consideration of the L2 literary text at the nexus of multiple histories is the issue of history itself (Wertsch, 2002). In the L2 classroom, whenever we leave the safe haven of learners' own frames of reference – learning to describe the immediate physical environment and to talk about their daily lives, their likes and dislikes, etc. – and enter into learning and

communication about aspects of the L2 culture that all have their own histories, *we are then also teaching history*. As we know, issues of *whose* histories, and of the particular dimensions of what we remember collectively as history, are “transparent” to the person doing the remembering; we look through the narratives that shape what we know and believe, ostensibly to the “real” event within (Wertsch, 2002, p. 5).

As mentioned in the opening of this article, the teaching of literature and culture/history in conventional language curricula tends to avoid explicit treatment of the cultural narratives that underpin the text or history under consideration, including those that intersect with the discourses at work when students study aspects of L2 histories. Teachers may present students with texts carefully selected to be accessible or quickly comprehensible, which offer examples of particular language features, or which are widely considered representative of a particular genre or epoch (Byram & Kramsch, 2008). Teachers generally accompany texts with discussion questions designed to shepherd students toward particular new insights or understandings (Gramling & Warner, 2012). Often students catch on quickly to the sorts of themes or historical information they are expected to learn from a particular text. For example, the study of poems of the German *Sturm und Drang* movement of the late 18th century is often coupled with learning about the transition from the German Enlightenment and emerging Romantic era, with its focus on man reconnecting with nature and the emergence of modern national identities and sentiments. Teachers may be successful at conveying these connections, at fostering classroom learning and discussion, but arguably it may remain the study of a thing remote in time and space from students’ own experiences, like one might examine a beautiful object in an antique shop; they will not necessarily engage their present-day historical or political consciousness in understanding that object. While intuitive teachers may steer their students toward such insights, traditional language curricula tend not to be structured around this approach.

Nexus analysis, by contrast, gives us a way to create the opportunity for an awareness of the *discourses in place* that made the writing of the *Sturm und Drang* poems possible at that particular time, and made the reading and reciting of the poems possible later, in German school classrooms and in bourgeois homes, as well as in concentration camps, both by the German guards and their Jewish victims. It enables students reading or singing the “Loreley” to engage in an *interaction order* with those who told the story of the Lorelei for nationalistic purposes, those who, like Heine, wrote his poem to criticize the original story, and the Americans who today sing the Heine poem for sentimental or touristic purposes while touring the Rhine, like one would sing *America the Beautiful*. Put another way, nexus analysis allows the engagement with multiple histories, including the students’ own historical consciousness, to become not only possible, but an essential part of the pedagogy.

Thus far I have used the term “multiple histories” without explaining it. The idea derives simultaneously from complexity theory as it has been repurposed for applied linguistics,³ and from Wertsch’s model of collective memory and history, which itself derives from Bakhtin and Vygotsky’s ideas of the complex and context-bound ways that cultural artifacts, such as texts and language, mediate between the individual and society. In Wertsch’s analysis, the “very nature of

³ In recent year, the tenets and methods of complexity theory and dynamic systems theory have been adapted for thinking about and conducting empirical research in applied linguistics (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; de Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007). It is a holistic view of language, language use, and learning/development that rejects a reductionist, deterministic view of these phenomena. For a detailed treatment of complexity theory in the context of language and language learning, see Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008).

memory, and the interpretations we make of it, vary according to sociocultural context” (2002, p. 18). At the risk of oversimplifying a long and sophisticated analysis distinguishing between collective memory and history (see Wertsch this issue), the point to keep in mind is that versions of history vary, from person to person, group to group, from one time to another, and at one time with the same people in different contexts. For example, based on discussions of ways the Holocaust is remembered, studied and discussed, Wertsch points out that “it is important for each generation to negotiate a usable past of its own about this event” (p. 46). This assertion contrasts markedly with the way that history—and our unexamined collective memories of historical events and epochs—is often presented and discussed in university language classrooms, either as learning about “what happened” in the past, or as part of the reading of a literary text. Wertsch’s point about each generation negotiating a “usable past” opens the door to studying literary texts—as mediating artifacts—at the nexus of multiple histories.

TWO STORIES AT THE NEXUS OF MULTIPLE HISTORIES

In this section I introduce two literary texts, Heinrich Heine’s (1840/1980) novel fragment, *The Rabbi of Bacherach*, and Else Lasker-Schüler’s (1921) short story, “The Wonder-working Rabbi of Barcelona,” which I will approach in the next section through nexus analysis. These are admittedly fairly obscure works, even if they are by well-known canonical authors. Therefore, I begin with a consideration of why I chose them and then I provide a brief description of each.

First, in my teaching and curriculum design experience, I have found that students in our language courses are often inherently interested in the topic of German-Jewish history and culture. Second, in terms of studying this topic I have noted that students’ interest is often based on their knowledge of or interest in the Holocaust and/or Nazi Germany. These are of course crucial areas of study, but many Germanists would agree that one key to understanding German history and of course German culture today lies not only in understanding the Nazi era and its effects in the post-war decades, but at the very least in also understanding its modern past, from the Enlightenment to the modernist epoch of the early 20th century. Therefore, the study of German-Jewish history and culture outside of the scope of the Holocaust contributes to a richer understanding even of that catastrophic era. Third, these two texts allow us to delve into aspects of German-Jewish culture integrated or embedded within modern German culture, as it lived and breathed before its intentional destruction. Fourth, the texts involve studying two fascinating and important figures of German culture, both of which U.S. university students might not otherwise encounter. Finally, in terms of history, these texts were selected because each is simultaneously a cultural artifact of its generation (as is any literary text, of course) and purports to represent an earlier epoch, in this case the European Middle Ages, and can be related to the students’ own subject positions vis-à-vis their own history.

The reader may agree with these reasons but at the same time question whether or not it is possible or advisable to teach them at the intermediate level of instruction, when most students do not yet have sufficient language abilities to (easily) read and comprehend the stories. This is an understandable concern, one that drives the selection, commonly, of much easier, shorter, and simpler texts at the lower-division level. I would counter these concerns with two points. First, because students will most likely only take lower-division courses in the L2 there is a strong imperative to facilitate the most sophisticated sort of learning possible. This is in line with many recent arguments in favor of bringing more cultural “content” into earlier parts of the curriculum, blurring or erasing the boundaries of the “two-tiered” curriculum common to U.S. universities,

and for moving away from a strongly skills-based curriculum toward one more in line with other fields in the humanities (Kramersch, Howell, Warner, & Wellmon, 2007; Maxim, 2000, 2006; MLA, 2007; Urlaub, 2012). The second reason has to do with pedagogy. As many scholars have shown (e.g. Maxim, 2006; Swaffar & Arens, 2005), even very difficult texts can be didacticized so as to be accessible to students. If instructional time does not allow for students to read the texts in their entirety, they can read selected excerpts from the texts over the course of a quarter or a semester, as a long-term reading project. Alternatively, students can read the entire texts in a dual-language mode, which allows them to use English to understand the narratives and the L2 to delve into new vocabulary, grammar, and readings skills. Furthermore it allows the instructor to use valuable class time teaching the students how to talk about and do activities related to the texts in the L2.⁴ Classroom activities can also make dynamic, principled use of both the L2 and English, where the use of English is always intended to support L2 learning and use (see Levine, 2011). Activities based on the texts can involve intensive reading activities and tasks in class, and at-home assignments that ask students to reflect critically on aspects of the texts, the subject matter, and their own learning processes.

Heinrich Heine's *Der Rabbi of Bacherach*

Heine (1797—1856), worked on the *Rabbi von Bacherach* over many years, but ultimately the work remained a fragment. He drafted the first two chapters in 1824, and the third around 1840. He then published the fragment in that year. As the students studying the text learn, Heine was quite conflicted about the text, and offered differing explanations over his lifetime as to why it was never finished (see Sammons, 1964).

The work begins with a description of the Jews in the medieval town of Bacherach on the Rhine. It is Passover and Rabbi Abraham leads the *seder* with his household. Two strangers arrive, and as is the custom they are welcomed into the celebration. The rabbi soon discovers that the two strangers have deposited the body of a child beneath the Passover table, clearly intending to accuse the Jews of ritual murder (an all too common occurrence through the Middle Ages, and even into the 19th century). The rabbi takes his wife, Sara, and flees the festival, taking her on an overnight journey to Frankfurt am Main. They attend services in the synagogue there and the point of view changes to that of Sara, who speaks from the women's gallery of the synagogue. When Sara hears her husband singing the prayer for the dead, she faints. In the third chapter, the rabbi meets a friend from his student days, an apostate Sephardic Jew, who is sketched out in some detail, including information about the rabbi's young days abroad in Spain. The fragment concludes with a note that the rest of the story was lost through no fault of the author. Heine maintained that it had been lost in a fire, but in fact the evidence points to Heine never having completed it (Sammons, 1964).

This is also borne out by a close reading of the text, which contains numerous internally conflicting narrative elements. Of particular note for the study of *The Rabbi of Bacherach* as a German-Jewish literary text is the detailed description of the Passover *seder* which, while

⁴ Cook (2010) has recently brought back into focus the idea of translation and the use of translations for language teaching, arguing that contemporary applied linguistics has made the use of translation beyond "grammar-translation" not only workable, but useful. In the second-year courses at my institution we routinely make use of dual-language texts to help introductory and intermediate students gain access to texts that would otherwise remain outside of their abilities in German (e.g., Zillekens, ed., 2003).

beautifully narrated, does not contribute directly to the development of the plot. This is one indication that Heine, who converted to Protestantism in 1825, not long after drafting the first chapters, may have been using the text to work through his personal conflicts about his career and his standing as a bourgeois German Jew in an era of emancipation and rapid assimilation of the Jews in Germany in the first part of the 19th century. I will end this brief look at the text and Heine's biography with the observation that for this, one of his few explicitly "Jewish" works, Heine chose to place the story in the Middle Ages, in the small town of Bacherach as well as the famous, and in fact infamous, Frankfurt ghetto, which had been almost completely destroyed by fire in the year of Heine's birth, 1797, marking the emergence of Germany's Jews from centuries of social and political isolation.

Else-Lasker-Schüler's "Wonder-Working Rabbi of Barcelona"

Robertson (1999) calls *"The Wonder-Working Rabbi of Barcelona"* "an elliptical and often obscure tale which draws on many aspects of Else Lasker-Schüler's rich imaginative life" (p. 224). At the center of the story, which ostensibly takes place in medieval Barcelona, are Eleazar, the wonder-working rabbi, presented as a mystical figure to his congregation, and Amram, a poetess who is the "daughter of a distinguished man who had the task of building the watchtowers of Spain's greatest cities" (Lasker-Schüler, 1999, p. 226). Pablo, the Gentile mayor's son, is in love with Amram, and the narrative, though circuitous and at times misleading, traces the love story through the destruction of the Jewish community at the hands of a mob. With poetic language and images that appear to supersede a coherent storyline, we depart from anything resembling the "real" city of Barcelona as a ship mysteriously appears in the market square, apparently there to provide a haven for Amram and Pablo to be "transfigured by immense love" (p. 229). They are watched by the mayor's dog, which has the unlikely name of Abraham. Eleazar is called upon to save the community, and the Spaniards for their part turn to him to help remove the ship from the market. But he offers only sage words rather than actions, apparently at peace with sacrificing himself and his followers. He ultimately is not the savior of the community, which is then destroyed.

The story is a masterful work of modernist literature, and a wonderful example of Lasker-Schüler's powerful writing. Unlike Heine, whose writings seldom dealt explicitly with things Jewish, the story is part of a larger body of mostly poetic works that comprise Lasker-Schüler's explorations of Jewish identity in the young 20th century. But the story also stakes out a place in the tensions of the era between Zionists, who believed that there was no future for Jews in Europe and that assimilation was impossible, and those who believed that Jews could assimilate successfully and live in Christian Europe as Jews. One can also interpret the story as a yearning for the naïve faith in God and the waiting for a savior of earlier generations; or as the modernist's search for truth in the aesthetic creations of a people and the way they work through their doubts about the existence of God.

NEXUS ANALYSIS: DESIGNING LEARNING TASKS AND ACTIVITIES

In this section I consider the ways nexus analysis can be brought to bear in making pedagogical decisions in order to guide student activity and learning, as they engage, navigate, and change the nexus of practice.

Engaging the Nexus of Practice

Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, which Scollon and Scollon (2004) adapted as the historical body (Nishida, 1958), asserted that "the 'unconscious' is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79). For Scollon and Scollon, engaging the nexus of practice means, crucially, making the analyst's place "conscious" and explicit. By studying a phenomenon we become part of the phenomenon. For our purposes, the students, and their teacher, are analysts when they take up any cultural artifact for the purpose of learning something about the L2 culture or society. Awareness of this is what engaging the nexus of practice is about.

With regard to the literary works under consideration, there are different ways the learner can engage the nexus of practice. Engaging the nexus of practice means, crucially, finding a way to place the students themselves in this continuum, of providing the curricular structure for them to position themselves as historical beings between the narrated time of the story and their present-day experience, of exploring bridges between their own concerns and the concerns of the Jews in both texts, of tuning into the "layered simultaneity" (Blommaert, 2005) of multiple historical bodies at which they themselves are the nexus. This is particularly important if the texts are to be read and studied piecemeal over the course of one or more academic terms. These goals can and should include language goals—how students will expand their vocabulary and knowledge of grammatical and discursive forms—but more importantly, they can be expressed in terms of the ways the project should expand students' analytical range, as they delve into aspects of German/German-Jewish history, manifestations of collective memory, aspects of the authors' biographies, different literary genres, issues of the works' reception in the generations since their publication, and ways that the tensions that emerge within each text resonate with present-day tensions, whether in contemporary Jewish culture(s), or in other social contexts.

Navigating the Nexus of Practice

This is the main work of nexus analysis, and the set of analytical techniques that allow for teaching histories and texts as part of the complex system of the language classroom. Translating it to curricular structures, it is a way to focus activity and raise awareness, inherently critical if it involves exploring the historical body, the interaction order, and discourses in place. Figure 2 adopts Scollon & Scollon's graphic of navigating the nexus of practice with the specifics of this analysis.

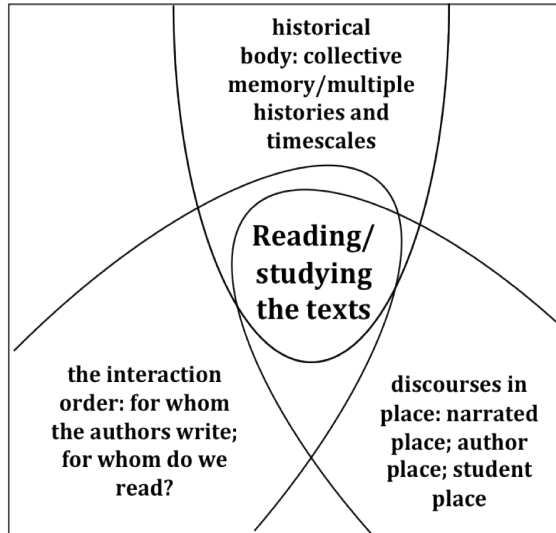


Figure 2: *Cycles of discourse in the study of literary texts at the nexus of multiple histories*

Historical body

What aspects of history are “unconscious,” whereby we are aware that “it’s always been that way” but are not aware of why, separately from what we know of the simple chronology of events? And how is it that there are so many different views of almost any event or trend? In addition to multiple interpretations of historical events, each generation also gives its own meanings and value to those events, and different groups assign different meanings at one and the same time. The main point of this part of the analysis with and for students is to raise their awareness that history is not simply what happened in the past, rather the many ways that the things that happened are represented and remembered in a range of contexts.

In our two literary texts, there are two very different representations of medieval Europe, and of Jews in medieval Europe. Heine’s indulges in a somewhat sentimental portrait of the close-knit, traditional Jewish community along the Rhine, one which contrasts with the rabbi’s flight, leaving his congregation to the mob that would massacre it. In both stories the reader can recognize a view of German Jews’ search and yearning for acceptance in German society; in both the reader gets a sense of the ambivalence toward the idea of the wandering Jew in exile, searching for a homeland, and the homeland as a new sort of “savior” in modern times. In the two texts we have two different views of the persecution of the Jews, as part of their plight as the “chosen people.” And we have two different versions of a longing for a simpler time, when Jewish rituals and faith structured and guided people’s lives, even when these seemed to contribute to their own deaths. Through a range of tasks students can explore these differing ways of representing histories. For example, students could organize these representations graphically in rubric charts (see Swaffar & Arens, 2005), or through digital media, such as online timelines (see Rasmussen, 2011).

Next, students can explore what is “second nature” to or part of the historical body of the characters in the stories: the practice of religious rituals, such as the Passover *seder*, consultation with the rabbi in times of crisis, the cultural and religious separation between Gentile and Jew. This brings into sharp relief the aspects of the stories in which this historical body appears to be flouted, or violated by the author, i.e. moments in which the authors present but then appear to

undermine what appears to be self-understood by the characters in the story. In the Lasker-Schüler story the students will note that the implicit truth would appear to be that the rabbi is the hero or savior of his congregation, but the opposite turns out to be the case. To analyze the historical body in these texts would entail learning about Jewish life in the early 19th and the early 20th centuries, specifically what was important and of value to, in particular, the bourgeois Jews of each generation. This could be accomplished through task-based activities in the classroom, outside-of-class research projects, or supportive readings supplied by the instructor (or all of these). Students could create materials based on their investigations, such as class presentations, or a wiki or other sort of webpage. Here students could also investigate how things changed in the century between the lifetimes of the two authors, and what remained largely the same.

In addition to exploring these aspects of history, the students can consider the idea of multiple timescales in the study of the stories: the narrated time of the stories; of the Jews in medieval Spain or medieval Rhineland; of the authors' lifetime and the place of these texts in their body of works; of German-Jewish life in German-speaking lands; of post-WWII study of pre-War German-Jewish author. Finally, the timescales of the present day, and even of students' own language class, should be taken into consideration.⁵ Regarding the text from both the inside (narrated time etc.) and outside, in a temporal sense, would afford the students the opportunity to move beyond the study of the texts as intellectual exercise, to reflect upon the ways each fits into and intersects with multiple other aspects of the system comprised of the texts, the authors, the teacher, the students, etc. In particular, studying the texts at the nexus of multiple timescales can facilitate learning about and gaining insights into students' themselves and their own histories. For example, at the core of both texts is the search for a new basis for "Jewish identity" in each author's lifetime; in both cases it is partly about (re)connecting with imagined origins of a mythical Jewish past. The timescales of the entire Middle Ages is compressed or telescoped into textual invocations of that remote past. In the present day, students can, and should, explore ways that in our time representations of a mythic past convey meanings through the similar compression of timescales. This investigation could take any number of forms in the classroom, as students brainstorm and forge linkages. For example, it could focus on any U.S. presidential campaign, heavy with invocations of Revolutionary War America and the Founding Fathers, as decades of political upheaval and transformation are expressed in shorthand in order to link the candidate to those historical roots, whether real or imagined.⁶

Interaction order

This is an extension of the students' investigation of the historical body, focusing now on the dialogic relationships at work, again both within the texts and between the text and multiple readers. Students learn that each text does not exist simply as a set of words meant to represent Jewish life in an earlier epoch; they take part in an ongoing set of dialogues, each in its own time (Bakhtin, 1994). Though Heine might not have recognized or acknowledged it, the story about the Rabbi of Bacherach was part of a longstanding debate in German-Jewish cultural production, oscillating between sentimentalism for lost traditions and mourning the loss of the Jewish homeland, and disdain for what was regarded as the superstitious, backward ways of older

⁵ Here in particular the use of an online timeline tool, such as Timeglider (timeglider.com), can structure student work toward understanding and thinking about relevant timescales.

⁶ Multiple, often conflicting interpretations of the same U.S. historical event or period, from the Revolutionary War to the Vietnam War, also bear consideration in students' investigation of multiple timescales.

generations in the face of modern, assimilated bourgeois life. Lasker-Schüler, together with other writers of the German modernist era, such as Franz Kafka, Joseph Roth, Stefan Zweig and others, sought to, in a sense, offer the world a new set of texts—texts that could only be understood through interpretation and were intended to hold different meanings for different readers—in a way to replace the ancient ones in which many secular, assimilated Jews had lost (unquestioned) faith. The “Wonder-Working Rabbi” appears to strive for that function.

But these are not the only dialogues in which the texts are participants and that intersect at the nexus of multiple histories where the students read and study the stories. A nexus analysis would have students consider the ways in which these texts might be given meaning or be of interest to contemporary Germans. This would involve examining the German post-war preoccupation with things Jewish, from pre- and post-war Jewish literature, to Klezmer music and all aspects of the modern state of Israel.⁷ And the analysis should not stop there: students can place German-Jewish interaction orders in dialogue with American-Jewish ones. Exploration of the American fascination with aspects of Jewish history and culture in the popular imagination, from *Fiddler on the Roof* to *Seinfeld*, could foster a critical view of contemporary U.S. cultural frames, as well as reflexively back on the other histories under investigation.

In uncovering these layers of dialogues at work within and outside the texts, which includes students bringing themselves into this dialogue, students move beyond simply “reading” the text for a language class; affordances are opened for learning that connects learners to writers and readers of remote generations, and can provide them with cultural capital to engage in new ways with German speakers in their own lives, and with members of their own social and cultural networks.

Discourses in place

With the exception of certain genres such as parables, stories are almost always located somewhere, even if the location is not an actual geographically identifiable one. As discussed earlier, the relevant discourses in place in translating our nexus analysis to curricular design are as much a part of the system as the interaction order or the historical body. In these two texts the locations are made explicit: Bacherach on the Rhine and Frankfurt am Main in the Heine story; and Barcelona in the Lasker-Schüler story. Heine’s description of the two locations is based on his own knowledge of German-Jewish history, and perhaps also on stories he had heard in his own lifetime of the Frankfurt ghetto. By contrast, Lasker-Schüler’s Barcelona bears no direct resemblance to that city, either in the medieval period or her own day. This was surely intentional; in this story Barcelona is invoked more than described, and it is of significance much more for what it *evokes*, an exotic environment meant to keep the reader somewhat off balance, and here we see the similarity to Heine’s text. Though we place Heine’s story historically in Bacherach and Frankfurt, we recognize two sets of discourses in place: the actual sites that one could visit, and

⁷ To concretize this idea with and for students, the class discussion could begin with this poignant observation by Derrida:

It’s the paradox of an image in which the two identities are caught up in a mutual fascination and where, at the same time, however, transcendence and “foreignness,” the heterogeneity of each of them, remain intact. The German Jew is fascinated by the German, the German is fascinated by the Jew, it’s a terrifying couple: and at the same time, no identification is possible. The Jew remains absolutely foreign, infinitely foreign, to the German. (Derrida, 2004, p. 46).

the ways the sites themselves are designed to make the reader feel or react. For Heine the humorously grotesque, detailed description of the Frankfurt ghetto and the people in it bring into sharp relief the German Jews' liberation from that ghetto, a world to which in Heine's day there is no desire to return. And yet there is a sentimental edge to the description of the synagogue, a lament, perhaps, for a lost world. Lasker-Schüler's Barcelona is also intended to evoke particular feelings or perceptions, in this case a fascination with the exotic, the *foreign* Jews of Spain, whom German-Jews had long regarded as mysterious, and perhaps more enlightened than German Jews. In the classroom, students could focus close attention on the ways the stories are anchored in the places, both the cities and sites within them: the Passover table; the gate of the Frankfurt ghetto; the market square of Barcelona; the Babel-like tower being built by Amram's father. Students reflect upon the meanings of the locations themselves, in part by imagining the same plot devoid of place descriptions, or taking place in other locations. Regarding discourses in place in relation to the authors, students can engage in a classroom task that would ask them to change the narrative for the purpose of uncovering ways that place itself holds meaning: what if the stories were set in the Frankfurt of Heine's generation, or the Berlin of Lasker-Schüler's day? How would they be different? How would they be the same? A further step would ask students to imagine they were reading and studying the text in Barcelona itself, or in Bacherach: how might the experience be different for the students? All of these classroom "thought experiments" aim to emphasize that something as static and "non-geographic" as a text is deeply immersed in discourses of place, both within the text and outside of it. In the process, the remoteness of the place in which students are studying the texts might also come into relief, as a means again of raising learners' critical awareness of the themselves as part of the entire process and system.

These are not the only discourses in place that call for consideration, however. Keeping the students at the nexus of multiple histories also means integrating consideration of the discourses in place of which the students themselves are a part. These include the classroom,⁸ of course, but also the *places* that make up each individual's frames of reference: what sorts of discourses in place make up the individual student's means of even imagining the places represented in the texts, or the places in which the authors lived? Like real and imagined histories, so too are real or imagined *places* part of students' interpretations. When they read of a "ghetto" in medieval Frankfurt, the differences and similarities to present-day "ghettos" deserve scrutiny, if only to flesh out diverse understandings and interpretations. Regarding the mythologized, stylized, surreal Barcelona of Lasker-Schüler's imagination, students might index present-day popular discourses of place that serve a similar purpose, such as Narnia or Middle Earth, the mere mention of which indexes myriad simultaneous meanings of "place" for students.

Changing the Nexus of Practice

This is perhaps the most difficult of the tasks of a nexus analysis, both to describe and to realize, and in translating it to pedagogical practice. Like an agent in a complex, dynamic system, the agent is guided by the presence of attractors, though the agent's trajectory through the system is not directly *caused* by these. In a classroom, and in the curriculum on which it is based, we hope

⁸ One can reflect upon the very act of reading the text, in the four walls of the classroom, as risking "sterilizing" it, as one of my students expressed to me. Students might contrast the experience of reading a literary text in the classroom with reading it in the library, or lying in the grass in a park, and imagine ways their interpretations and responses to the text might differ in those different places.

that students will achieve the learning outcomes we have established ahead of time. In the treatment of the example texts under consideration here, the hope is that learners arrive at new understandings, not just of these literary texts, but of aspects of German-Jewish and German history and culture, and crucially, of their own historical and political consciousness as native- or foreign-born Americans, as majority or minority citizens, as Jews, Christians, or Muslims, and as members of multiple, overlapping communities in their everyday lives. Apart from being works of literature worth reading as such, the selection of these texts is based on ways they could be investigated at the nexus of multiple, complex histories in German and German-Jewish culture, as well as the ways this nexus itself overlaps with students' contemporary multiple, complex histories, as I have sought to demonstrate here. In this regard, transforming the nexus of practice means that the study of the texts in the language class is not merely an intellectual exercise for students' enjoyment (though it is hopefully also that), but as a means of transforming perspectives and practices, one student at a time, for approaching and communicating with people in new ways.

For it is language teachers, perhaps more than any other group of educators, who recognize the power of communication, and especially translingual communication, to transform practice for peaceful aims. To create affordances for such reflection and raised awareness of themselves and their own role in remembering and representing histories, students can move deep into the text, and also back up their view to the broadest historical and analytic scope. Within the text they can explore the ways the characters communicate with one another, or don't communicate, as the case may be. In Heine's tale, the significance of what is said appears to be outweighed by what is not said, words that might have averted disaster for the Jews of Bacherach. In Lasker-Schüler's story, analyzing the communication among the characters is difficult, because the words are ambiguous, misleading, even surreal. Students can speculate upon what both authors might have been aiming at; why did Heine eventually publish his fragment, as imperfect as he must have known it to be? Who was the readership of the "Wonder-Rabbi" in 1921 and what effect might Lasker-Schüler have hoped for with the story, which appeared in Berlin during the relatively brief period of intense cultural production among Jews there? This also calls for speculation by the students, but here it's about the student projecting some sense of their own idealism into the story, or onto the authors, and of raising students' historical and political consciousness overall, beyond the scope of any one text, collective memory, or version of history.

Some might object that asking students to speculate about author intent, or to imagine the historical contexts in which the authors lived and worked, even if based on actual historical or biographical knowledge, causes problems not only of validity of interpretations, but also of evaluating and assessing student performance in reading and studying literary works in the ways described in this article. It must be emphasized that we are not aiming to train learners as literary scholars per se, rather to open new discourse worlds and raise historical and political consciousness across multiple timescales. While in an upper-division literature course the students may acquire the tools for literary analysis as a central purpose, nexus analysis gives students sociolinguistic tools, anchored in discourse. The validity of the analysis, whether derived from historical or biographical facts or explication of relevant interaction orders, historical bodies, and discourses in place, lies in the very transformation of the nexus that includes the learners' own position in that nexus. In terms of real-world assessment of student performance, it means placing more emphasis on formative or process-oriented assessments over summative ones. These can include student portfolios made up of notes gathered individually or in groups, postings to class discussion boards, wikis, Moodles, and so forth, as well as individual or group

writing tasks on aspects of the texts and the histories being studied (see Lee, 2007; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). Dynamic assessment in this model sees teaching, learning, and assessment as a fully integrated whole. A formative, dialectical, spiral approach, rather than a linear read-learn-discuss-test progression, allows even learners' speculations to be a component of transforming the nexus of practice.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have made use of the structure and tenets of nexus analysis as a method to think about the ways literary texts can be integrated into the language curriculum that move beyond the mere instrumentalization of such texts for language learning, toward the creation of affordances for the development of students' historical and political consciousness. This is not intended simply as a new methodology to supplant communicative language teaching, rather as a means of raising the bar of communicative language teaching, away from vacuous treatments of history and literature and toward an understanding of communication as an all-encompassing nexus of social and historical practice.

At the same time, the present analysis was carried out as an extended "thought experiment," to think through how the powerful ideas of nexus analysis translate into curricular practice. Such experiments call for further refinement and revision, and experimentation in the classroom, and in research.

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